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Federal lawmakers from the suburbs railed against the Chicago Transit Authority Monday, while also calling on the governor to find cash to expand Metra.

The political appeals came as transit supporters ratcheted up pressure on state lawmakers to hike sales taxes to prevent fare hikes and service cuts to regional buses and trains.

Yet, lawmakers remain gridlocked over bailing out the CTA, Metra and Pace, which are threatening higher fares and drastic service cuts to fill a \$260 million shortfall.

“We need a financial integrity upgrade for the CTA,” said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, a Highland Park Republican, following a hearing he held on suburban transit with U.S. Rep. Melissa Bean, a Barrington Democrat.

At the Chicago hearing, a panel of lawmakers grilled a CTA executive on the agency’s much-criticized employee absentee record, a vacant floor at its lavish headquarters and its billions of dollars in pension debt.

State Rep. Ed Sullivan and state Sen. Michael Bond also questioned whether a plan to give the agencies another \$450 million, largely from a quarter-of-a-percentage-point sales tax hike, gives too much money to the CTA.

The plan would give the CTA about \$193 million, Metra nearly \$97 million and Pace about \$52 million. The rest of the money would go to paratransit and the Regional Transportation Authority, which oversees the agencies.

State Rep. Sid Mathias defended the funding plan, has yet to gain significant support and is

opposed by Gov. Rod Blagojevich.

“I don’t look at this as a CTA bailout anymore than I look at it as a Pace or Metra bailout,” Mathias said.

The proposed sales tax increase is set to be split the same way the current quarter-percentage-point sales tax in the collar counties and one percent sales tax in Cook County is divvied up among the agencies.

Kirk and Bean also called on state lawmakers to come up with billions of dollars in state money to expand Metra, especially the suburb-to-suburb suburban transit access route line or STAR, which is at least a decade away.

The state money is needed to match federal funds that could be lost if the cash isn’t raised by the end of 2009, Kirk warned. Blagojevich previously has proposed expansion funding, but lawmakers didn’t support it.

Meanwhile, business leaders and the Metropolitan Planning Council held a rally at Chicago’s Union Station to call on lawmakers to approve a transit tax hike.

“Business needs transit,” said Mandy Burrell, a spokeswoman for the planning group.

So far, the funding plan has gone nowhere. Blagojevich has threatened to veto it if approved, but lawmakers have not seriously considered other funding options, Mathias said.

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